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SUBJECT: EMPOWERING THE WOMEN OF SOUTHEAST IRAQ

#### INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

1.) As part of our public outreach strategy, REO Basrah, along with the British Consulate General, sponsored a conference on empowering women on February 20. The purpose was to encourage women to promote stability and economic prosperity. The conference was held at the Basrah Airport and attended by 34 women from Basrah, Dhi Qar, Maysan, and Muthanna provinces. The participants included politicians, attorneys and judges, physicians, teachers, engineers, and representatives from NGOs. The conference also received extensive press coverage. End summary.

#### PEACE, STABILITY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

2.) The first portion of the conference focused on peace and stability. Our objective was to encourage women to take back their streets from the militia who wage intimidation campaigns on the citizens and target Coalition bases with mortars and rockets. REO Director Louis Bono spoke of the power of women. Quoting American suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, he urged the women to harness this power against the destructive forces in their communities. He told the women that the role of the Coalition is limited in this regard; it is up to the Iraqi people to take back their streets. British Consul General Rosalind Marsden said in the coming months that Iraqis would retake control of security in Basrah and Maysan and discussed how women can play a role in this process. (Note: Provincial Iraqi Control - PIC - has already occurred in Dhi Qar and Muthanna. End note.) One example she cited is the police anonymous hotline. She said of the 45 calls received in the previous week, all were from women.

3.) While the UK and U.S. officials focused on militia violence, the Iraqi speakers focused on a different type - domestic violence. Basrah Provincial Council member Esra al-Saad spoke about the violence against women and children and called for legislation to protect women. Judge Suad Nassar agreed that women suffer under the law. She said the uneducated are most prone to violence and stressed the need to train women, including elected officials, on their rights.

4.) The participants agreed on the need for education on women's issues, especially for women in the countryside and ghettos, as well as for male leaders. They said the Convention to Eliminate Discrimination and Violence Against Women (CEDAW) was, in part, inconsistent with Islamic principles but work is being done to draft an acceptable version. They did agree on the utility of using experiences of women in other countries as building blocks. On militia violence, they discussed the need to address

violence sponsored by external forces in order to improve security. One woman pointed out that most of the people killed and injured in market explosions were women. Another drew a nexus between militias and domestic violence: "sometimes when women report on militia activity, they are beaten by their husbands." There was also discussion on the rights of female prisoners.

#### A ROLE IN THE ECONOMY

5.) The second part of the conference focused on economic opportunities for women. By empowering women economically, they will be more inclined to foster stability to protect their interests. Two representatives from USAID's IZDIHAR project addressed the conference. Susanne Jalbert spoke about small business development and Thelma Tajirian explained about small business loans and microfinance. The REO director cited the Prophet Mohammed's wife Lady Khadeijah as an example of the prominent role women can play in the business community. He also mentioned USG programs for women, including the Gift Fund to promote public-private partnerships. Many of the women expressed an interest in seeking business opportunities and helping those in their communities to do so. Jalbert handed out a CD-rom containing information on how to start a business and obtain credit.

#### ENGAGING THE MEDIA

6.) Media coverage of the conference was extensive. There seemed almost as many reporters and photographers from television, radio, and print media as there were participants. We were surprised by the media presence, as we were told beforehand that most women were reluctant to publicize their efforts or their association with the Coalition. However, during the conference, few if any, seemed camera shy. This followed their discussion on media engagement to promote the role of women in society and expose the issue of domestic violence.

#### MOVING FORWARD

7.) One of the immediate successes of the event was bringing together women from southeastern Iraq. All agreed on the need for female representation in government, and there was discussion on coordination between NGOs and politicians. We encouraged them to form an umbrella association to remain in contact and coordinate their efforts, but there was too little time to accomplish this. However, several women got together to discuss the formation of such an association. There was overwhelming consensus to continue the dialogue, and the participants asked UK and U.S. officials for assistance. As we move forward, Jalbert suggested we focus on leadership, business development, and security training, as well community coalitions. We are pleased with outcome of this event and will continue our work with the women of the region.

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